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PSYCHOLOGICAL ANTECEDENTS FOR ONLINE CONFORMITY OVER SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

User-dominated social media have become one of the major social networking tools recently. This study aims to examine the interpersonal influences in virtual communities with a focus on conformity and possible psychological antecedents-involvement and social identity. The results show that product involvement is positively related to informational conformity. This finding implies that consumers who consider the product to be highly related to them are more likely to be influenced by the information provided in social media such as a virtual community. Managerial implications and suggestions for future research are provided.

Introduction

With the emergence of social media (i.e., trend of advanced social networking via the Internet or mobile phones), people now have more access to interact with others in different ways. Examples of the new forms of social media include: online forums, blogs, multimedia networks, and instant messengers such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and Yahoo! Groups. Both in marketing and research there is a growing attention for virtual communities. Because of the wide range and fast speed of communication that social media capable of, there is a growing attention from both marketers and researchers.

Virtual communities as one of the form of new social media, in which the information is shared by people having common interests from all over the world with no time limits, provide an unofficial channel for the retailers to communicate with the consumers. Retailers devote efforts in virtual community marketing and expect it to enhance the credibility of the information, and to build up the post-sale relationship with consumers, while these goals usually cost more to achieve by traditional practices. For example, retailers provide free trials to bloggers who have high viewed rate and encourage them to leave review on their own blog; also retailers reply to the reviews about their services on virtual communities. However, without knowing how the customer-created information influence on other

consumers, the effectiveness of these marketing efforts is hard to be determined.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the interpersonal influences in the new forms of social media. More specifically, this study builds on previous studies in conformity and examines the psychological antecedents of conformity in virtual communities as well as the influence on consumer purchase intention. Conformity is defined as one's behavioural response of compliance with social norms [1] [2]. Conformity leads the individual to accept the information from the source as evidence of reality, or comply with other members' expectations. Although previous studies had found the antecedents of conformity from the aspect of information source [3] [4] [5], the results are limited in physical communities. In addition, in applications of Web 2.0, the context and participations are mainly dominated by the consumers, thus characteristics of consumers seem more influential than those of information source in the process of changing opinions. Nevertheless, previous studies seldom explored factors that are related to of conformity with virtual communities, so the implications of provoking consumers' conformity to virtual communities are rarely found.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of conformity in virtual community with an aspect of psychological factors. Considering the features of virtual communities which highlight the importance of consumers' characteristics, consumers' involvement and social identity are purposed as antecedents of their virtual conformity. The results of this study are expected to provide the retailers with insights of the process of interpersonal influences in virtual communities and inspire effective marketing strategies.

Conceptual Framework

Early studies in conformity agree with the definition by the article in which the author described conformity as a behavioural response of compliance with social norms [1]. Though social norms are seldom nominally written, people gather the signs of the norms by observing the group's behaviour and

even from the group pressure [1]. The pressure makes people conform to others' expectation, and changes their own attitudes. Conformity is a result of two social influences, informational influence and normative influence. Informational influence makes one accept information as evidence about reality, and normative influence makes one conform to others' expectations for social or physical rewards. The two dimensions of conformity resulted from informational influence and normative influence will hereafter be denoted as information conformity and normative conformity respectively [6]. The authors of [7] later supported the two dimensions in their study. Others [8] further indicated that informational conformity and normative conformity could occur simultaneously while both norms and relevant information exist. Conformity functions as a motivator of purchase in both physical and virtual community settings [9] [10] [11]. For example, authors in [9] suggested that conformity is one of the market mavens' psychological influences, which would increase consumers' intention to purchase a certain product. It was also indicated that conforming to peer pressure would positively influence on apparel purchasing behaviour [11]. These studies showed that conformity in virtual communities might influence consumer purchase decisions, but what is more important for the researchers and the marketers are to investigate the antecedences of conformity in virtual communities and to explore the possibility to enhance it.

Antecedents of conformity

Both informational and normative influences lead to one's conformity [6]); however, studies have shown that they contribute to conformity differently.

In their experiment, the authors [3] matched informational and normative conformity with author's in [12] three processes of opinions change to understand the antecedents of conformity. The three processes are internalization, identification and compliance. Internalization refers to that one accepts the influence because the information perceived to be instrumental and conductive. Identification refers to that one adopts others' opinions or behaviours when the information is perceived to be associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship and the information source is identified with one's self. As to compliance, it refers to that one complies to the others' expectation to gain physical or social rewards or to avoid punishments, especially when the information source has strong norms [12]. By the similar goal orientation, the dimensions of conformity were matched with Kelman's processes [3]. When consumers internalize the functional

information, they are also achieving the goal of informational conformity. When they identify with the identifiable information for self maintenance and/or comply with the irrefutable information for the external reward, they are also achieving the goal of normative conformity of social/ physical rewards.

Based on these matches, authors in [3] put emphasizes on the antecedents of conformity from the aspect of information source. By manipulating the similarity and uniformity of information source as experts/ other consumers and high/ low consensus, the authors concluded that only informational conformity effected the evaluation of the product in their experiment. Their results departed from prior studies which suggested that unanimity or consensus warrants an inference of conform and provided a more detailed condition of the effectiveness of informational and normative conformity. In addition, their study provided a reasonable inference of the antecedents of conformity from the characteristics of information source.

The framework proposed by the authors [3] was later supported by other studies [4] [13] [14]. Other studies that focused on the antecedents of conformity from the aspect of the characteristics of information source mostly based on the match by authors' study in [3]. For example, the author in [4] found that the similarity of the source to the consumers would have positive effect on the strength of informational conformity. Another author [13] manipulated extremity of norms by the group size and the number of expertise and concluded that informational conformity was more likely to occur with moderate norms than with extreme norms, and normative conformity was more likely to occur with extreme norms than with moderate norms. From the aspect of characteristics of task, others [15] found that when the task is to determine a most correct one among alternatives, more informational conformity would be induced, and when the task is to evaluate among alternatives, more normative conformity would be induced.

The causal relations between the characters of consumers and conformity were further explored [14]. Considering involvement as a cognitive stimulus of accepting interpersonal influences, involvement was hypothesized to positively affect informational influence. The results supported the hypothesized effects and showed the importance of involvement as an antecedent of conformity.

Involvement and Conformity

Involvement, by the definition in the article [16] [17], refers to the "relevance" of an object to a person. The object could be an advertisement, a product, or

the act of “purchase decision-making”. Thus, product involvement refers to the degree that the consumer intends to be relevant to a specific product. In other studies authors [18] suggested that involvement may vary with the motivations that a person devotes him/her self into the object, and the effects on information processing. When motivated by utilitarian motivation, consumers with high involvement concern about the cost and benefits of using the object [18], and engage in searching for more information about the product [19]) such as the costs, benefit, and other functional information that would help consumers to evaluate between other products. When motivated by value-expression motivation, consumers with high involvement concern about enhancing their self-esteem and self-concept [18] and project their self-images through the use of the object [20].

When consumers have high involvement in product motivated by utilitarian needs, the information sources that they found are more functional to fit their needs, thus, informational conformity is more likely to occur since consumers informational conform to the information source only if the source matches their own value system [12] [13]. Similarly, when consumers have high involvement in product motivated by self-expression needs, the information sources that they found are supposed to be attached to their self-image, thus normative influence in conformity is more likely to occur.

Community involvement, by the definition in the article [16], refers to the degree that consumers relate themselves to the communities, especially to virtual communities in this study. In some studies, it was denoted as group involvement or social involvement, and in information technology studies, it was denoted as user involvement [21] [22]. In physical communities, studies have shown indirect influences of community involvement on consumer behaviour. The key of the mediation effect is self-identification and similarity of the community members. With high involvement in community motivated by self-expression needs, consumers intend to maintain their relations with the community which they identify themselves to. This intention would motivate the consumers to protect their self-identification through conforming to the information from the source [23], thus normative conformity is formed. For example, study [11] compared between the influences of mothers' preference and of the influence of peer pressure on daughters' apparel purchasing behaviour, it was found that the daughters' apparel purchase behaviour will more conform to their peers than to mothers' preference when they are more involved in peer groups. From

another point of view, with high involvement in community motivated by utilitarian needs, the similarity of the community members to the consumers themselves would drive them to share and search information that is functional and matches their value system. For example, the author in the study [4] found that the similarity would lead to intense information sharing and processing thus result in informational conformity. Also, it is found that the utilitarian needs which result in more community involvement would drive consumers to articulate themselves and read others' articulation out of motivations such as seeking advises and learning more knowledge [10] on the virtual community that the members have common interests. Since consumers join the virtual communities which they share common goals or interests, the information shared should be functional and match their own value system. Thus, it is possible that the more the consumers involved in the virtual communities, the more they will accept informational influence and have higher informational conformity. Connected with the consumers' opinion changing process, this study proposed the relationships between involvement and conformity as follow:

H1: When consumers have higher product involvement, they are likely to have higher informational conformity.

H2: When consumers have higher product involvement, they are likely to have higher normative conformity.

H3: When consumers have higher community involvement, they are likely to have higher informational conformity.

H4: When consumers have higher community involvement, they are likely to have higher normative conformity.

H5: When consumers have higher informational conformity in virtual community they are likely to have higher purchase intention toward the discussed products.

H6: When consumers have higher normative conformity in virtual community, they are likely to have higher purchase intention toward the discussed products.

Social Identity

The concept of social identity was firstly introduced by the author in the study [24] as an individual's knowledge that the individual belongs to a certain social group with some emotional and value significance to the person. Some previous studies have classified the dimensions of social identity and the influences of each dimension [25] [26] distinguished three components of social identity as

cognitive component, evaluative component, and emotional component. Cognitive component refers to a person's awareness of one's membership in a social group, evaluative component refers to the positive or negative value that a person attaches with the community, and emotional component refers to the affective commitment and the emotion that a person involved with the community.

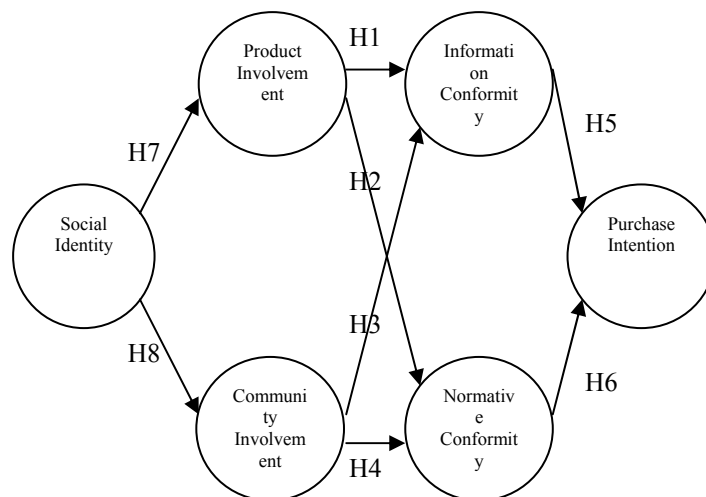
Social identity is not only expressed but also reconfirmed by comparing within and between groups [27]. The comparing process also reassures how the individual perceive him/herself. Hence, social identity is especially considered to be enhanced while the community membership is self-selected [26]. Therefore, for a community with self-selected memberships such as a virtual community, social identity should be able to better describe the sense of belongingness within the group [25]. Previous studies have implied the relationship between social identity and involvement [28] [29] [30]. For example, authors in their study [28] suggested that the social identity would enhance the loyalty and citizenship behaviours in the community settings. Others [30] indicated that social identity could maintain committed relationships with virtual communities and enhance the "we-intention", which refers to the emotional commitment of the community members to participate in joint actions in virtual communities. It was suggested in the article [30] that identification with the group would indirectly enhance the emotional commitment to the brand through sense of virtual community in brand community settings. Since identity with the community would make the community members perceive the community and the products related with the community more important and more relevant to the members, this study social identity is hypothesized to be related to product involvement and community involvement (see Figure 1).

H7: When consumers have higher social identity toward the virtual community, they are likely to have higher product involvement of the discussed products.

H8: When consumers have higher social identity toward the virtual community, they are likely to have higher community involvement of the virtual community.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Consumer Conformity in Virtual Community



Methodology

Samples and Procedures

The sample was selected randomly from e-mail lists from students of a large midwestern university in the U.S. The participants were limited to those who participated in a virtual community and had experiences of discussing products in the virtual community. A total of 4000 invitation emails were distributed while six were undeliverable. A total of 657 responses were received ($r=16.45\%$). Following a brief introduction of the definition of virtual community, two screening questions were used in order to ensure that the respondents were virtual community users and that product-related topics were discussed through interactions in the virtual community. The screening questions were (1) "Do you participate in any virtual communities?" and (2) "In the virtual communities that you participate in, do you discuss any products or services?". Among the collected 198 usable data, most respondents were males (61.1%), and females were relatively fewer (37.9%). The respondents were mainly undergraduate students (60.1%), followed by graduate students (23.2%) and respondents who did not indicate their status or other kinds of students such as certification students (16.7%). With regard to the respondents' use of virtual communities, more than half of the respondents reported that they usually participated in Facebook groups (59.1%), followed by forums (41.9%), blog or blog groups (37.4%), bulletin boards (26.8%), and E-mail ListServes (23.2%). Online game groups (13.6%) and newsgroups (10.1%) were the forms that the least respondents reported that they usually participated in. Table 1 provides the

demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics (N=198)

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Gender		
Female	75	37.9
Male	121	61.5
Choose not to answer	2	<.1
Student classification		
Undergraduate student	119	60.1
Graduate student	46	23.2
Choose not to answer or other	32	15.7
Forms of virtual community participated in*		
Facebook group	117	59.1
Forums	83	41.9
Blog group	74	37.4
E-mail ListServ	53	26.8
Bulletin board	46	23.2
Online game group	27	13.6
Newsgroup	20	10.1
Purposes of participating*		
Keeping in touch with friends	149	75.3
Searching for information	136	68.7
Have social interaction	128	64.4
Required by work/homework	36	18.2
Frequency of visits per week		
1-3 times	34	17.2
4-6 times	26	13.1
7-9 times	39	19.7
10 times or more	99	50.0
Length of time per visit		
Less than one hour	123	62.1
1-5 hour(s)	58	29.3
6-10 hours	7	3.5
11-15 hours	5	2.5
16-20 hours	1	.5
Longer than 20 hours	4	2.0
Information exposed to		
Positive	108	54.5
Neutral	85	42.9
Negative	5	2.5

Note: *Respondents were asked to choose all that applies.

Four main constructs measured in this study are involvement, conformity, purchase intention, and

social identity. Involvement includes product involvement and community involvement. Product involvement is defined as the degree to which the consumer relates him/herself with the product. It was measured by 14 items with 7-point semantic differential scales that were constructed by the author in the study [16]. The original Cronbach's α was 0.98. Community involvement is defined as the degree to which the consumers relate themselves with the virtual community. In this study, it was measured by 7-point semantic differential scales that were adapted by the authors in the article [22] from Zaichkowsky's scales [16]. Conformity also includes two dimensions: informational conformity and normative conformity. Although most previous studies in conformity manipulated informational and normative influences through experiments and measured conformity with consumers' actual behaviour of agreeing others' opinions [3] [15] [13], this study measured conformity empirically by adapting 11 items using a 5-point Likert scale from the study [7]. The original scales were developed to focus on products only. Among the 11 items, 8 items were developed to measure normative conformity, and the other 3 items were intended to measure informational influence in conformity. Social identity was measured by four items in 5-point Likert scale adapted from the study [25]. Consumers' intention to purchase products that were discussed in virtual communities was measured by adapting the 3 items scale from previous studies to the context of virtual communities [31] [32].

Table 2

Bivariate Correlation of the Constructs (N=198)

	Prod uct Invol veme nt (PI)	Com muni ty Invol veme nt (CI)	Nor mati ve Conf ormit y (NC)	Infor mati onal Conf ormit y (IC)	Soci al Ident ity (SI)	Purc hase Inten tion (PIN)
PI	.895					
CI	.463 ***	.865				
NC	.112	.097	.876			
IC	.279 ***	.068	.171 **	.722		
SI	.191 *	.347 **	.143 *	.174 *	.841	
PIN	.398 ***	.235 **	.235 **	.348 ***	.024	.740
Mean	4.62 5	5.31 8	2.62 2	3.71 8	3.34 2	3.786

S.D.	.784	1.15 2	.834	.648	.764	.708
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Reliabilities of the constructs are on the diagonal, and correlations are under the diagonal.
 *** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level, ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
 * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Results

A confirmatory factor analysis is performed and followed by a model re-specification [33]. The modified measurement model showed a good fit, $\chi^2(384) = 621.606$, $p = .000$, $NFI = .807$, $IFI = .916$, $TLI = .904$, $CFI = .915$, and $RMSEA = .056$. Structural equation modelling is employed to test the proposed model and the results are presented in Table 3. The χ^2 to degree of freedom ratio is 1.71 as suggested [34], and indicates that the data fits to the model well, ($\chi^2(391) = 669.617$). Model fit indices also show a moderate fit of the model ($RMSEA = .060$, $CFI = .90$). As proposed in H1, the influence of product involvement on consumers' informational conformity in the virtual community is significant ($\beta = .256$, $t = 3.867$, $p < .01$). However, contrary to expectation, the influence of product involvement is not significant on consumers' normative conformity in the virtual community as proposed in H2 ($\beta = .059$, $t = .735$, $p = .462$). The results failed to support H3 and H4. The effect of community involvement is not significant either on informational conformity ($\beta = -.032$, $t = -.797$, $p = .640$) or normative conformity ($\beta = .026$, $t = .467$, $p = .425$). The effects of conformity on purchase intention are supported. Consumers' informational conformity showed a moderate influence on their intention to purchase the products that were discussed ($\beta = .243$, $t = 3.647$, $p < .01$). Thus, H5 is supported. For H6, the consumers' normative conformity showed a smaller but significant influence on their purchase intention ($\beta = .106$, $t = 2.645$, $p < .01$). The influences of social identity on consumers' involvement are generally significant and supported. The effect is smaller on product involvement ($\beta = .147$, $t = 1.886$, $p = .059$), but it is relatively larger on community involvement ($\beta = .518$, $t = 4.801$, and $p < .01$). Thus, while H8 is supported, the effect on product involvement is so small that H7 is not supported.

Table 3

Structural Model Results

Structural Path	Coefficient	t-Value
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Product Involvement → Informational Conformity	.256***	3.867
Product Involvement → Normative Conformity	.059	.735
Community Involvement → Informational Conformity	-.032	-.797
Community Involvement → Normative Conformity	.026	.467
Informational Conformity → Purchase Intention	.243***	3.647
Normative Conformity → Purchase Intention	.106***	2.645
Social Identity → Product Involvement	.147*	1.886
Social Identity → Community Involvement	.518***	4.801
Goodness-of-fit: $\chi^2_{391} = 669.617$, $p = .000$; $CFI = .900$; $NFI = .793$; $RMSEA = .060$		

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Conclusion

Discussions

As hypothesized, product involvement is positively related to informational conformity. This result implies that consumers who consider the product to be highly related to them are more likely to be influenced by the information provided in social media such as a virtual community. This finding is congruent with the study [14], in which product involvement was found to have influence on informational conformity. In addition, consumers engage in word-of-mouth (WOM) in order to satisfy their need for information [19]. Thus, this result could also imply that consumers who are highly involved in a product are more likely to be affected by eWOM, which usually affects consumers' judgment of product performance through informational conformity [35].

In addition, although product-involved consumers may intend to project their self-image with the information about the product that could enhance personal image through using the product, product involvement does not lead to normative

conformity. The non-significant result might be due to the difference between the nature of the virtual community and the preference of the consumers. For example, the members of a virtual community for high school alumni might not have the same preference in apparel products, and the discussion about apparel products in the virtual community might not provide the personal image that an individual could identify with. In addition, compared with virtual communities for sharing same interests, virtual communities for keeping in touch with friends may contain diverse opinions about different products that may not form certain norms about personal images through using the products.

Another unexpected result is the non-significant effect of community involvement on conformity. This might result from the different natures of the virtual communities, too. Consumers who consider the community highly related to them might be involved for other reasons like keeping in touch with friends. Information shared in the virtual communities might not be what they need; thus, informational conformity is not affected by consumers' community involvement. In addition, the norms in using a certain product might not be as important as other norms in the community, so normative conformity is not affected by consumers' community involvement, either. This result could also imply that, in different types of virtual communities (e.g., a high school friends group versus a brand forum), the influences of informational and normative conformity might be different.

The results supported the direct paths from both informational conformity and normative conformity to purchase intention as hypothesized. The findings support previous studies observing the effects of normative conformity [36] and informational conformity [37], and provide a more integrated point of view from both informational and normative conformity in virtual communities. Study [36] suggested that normative conformity in virtual community has a positive relationship with consumers' acceptance of new technology products. In addition, through the informational conformity of eWOM, consumers' perception of product quality would be changed [37]. This current study contributes a linkage among these studies and suggests that both informational and normative conformity would change consumers' purchase intention in a virtual community where users share a sense of belonging.

The influences of social identity on consumers' involvement in virtual communities are confirmed as hypothesized. The result indicates that the more the consumers identify themselves to the virtual community, the more they will be involved with the

products that were discussed in the community and the virtual community per se. This result conforms to the result of the experiment [38] in which the authors indicated that the appraisals resulted from the social connection and social esteem of the group would enhance community members' perceived salience of the community.

This study provides insights into virtual community users' opinion changing process. Virtual community users might normatively and informationally conform to other consumers and purchase the products or services that were discussed if there is enough information that corresponds to their interests and if there are enough norms that make the members follow. Thus, when retailers stimulate the discussion about their products in web 2.0 virtual communities, e.g., provide free trial to the members, it is very likely that they are able to change consumers' attitudes through the normative and informational conformity. Besides, According to a survey by Forum One, a market research company, one of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of previous efforts in virtual community marketing is the hit-and-run attack strategies [39], by which strategy the retailers launch advertisements in the virtual communities without knowing the nature of the community. Knowing that conformity is more likely to happen when the consumers are more product-involved, marketers should put more emphasize on product related communities such as a product discussion forum rather than communities that are constructed by their target segmentations such as blogs for sororities. Educators may encourage people who are involved in special topics to explore related virtual communities to adhere together and increase the intention to accomplish certain educational goals. In healthcare, caregivers might be able to help the consumers involved in health care topics in virtual communities to get more information from other consumers and increase their intentions to control their health status through normative conformity and informational conformity.

Limitations and future research

Limitations of this study include the self-reported nature of the data and the generalizability of the results. The data collected were dependent on the respondents' perception, their intentions, and reporting skills to provide honest and accurate information, and these factors usually vary from person to person. The data were collected from a student population from a Midwestern university in the U.S. Since students may stand for a major party of virtual community users, the results provide a directional idea of the topic, but the generalizability

to other populations is limited. Also, this study did not target at a specific kind of virtual. Since there might be a confounding effect due to the nature of different types of virtual communities (i.e. social based communities, or brand based communities), future studies in the effect of different types of virtual communities, or studies focusing on a specific type of virtual communities are needed.

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